

Old-School Living

BY TRACI ANGEL

This converted rural Missouri high school represents the ultimate homecoming for one of its students.

Photography by Tim Ludwig, Camera Works Associates.com



When Netta Coon steps inside the auditorium where her 1966 graduation from Trenton High School in rural north-central Missouri was held, she fondly recalls walking across the stage and receiving her diploma. Today, 45 years later, those and many other childhood memories are just a few steps away. She lives in that old school building, which this year was renovated into a senior housing community.

Her apartment home is one of 35 units that comprise Adams Park, a multifamily housing community for seniors and that rose out of the former school's footprint.

It's easy for Coon to visualize graduation. The auditorium, among other whispers of Trenton High, remains to this day. Teachers' names still hang on doors. Blackboards and art supply cabinets adorn apartment interiors. A trophy case stands in the hallway. The developer wanted it that way.

Hamilton Properties Corporation resurrected the vacant three-

story building in just 18 months, converting the site that once housed a middle school, high school and junior college.

"It's like going back to school," says Coon, who recently returned to the town where she grew up to be closer to family. "I was totally amazed at those apartments. [The building] is gorgeous."

The apartment building today has meant more than just home for senior residents. It's a source of revenue for the city, which has enjoyed an uptick in visitors who have come back to see their "new" old school.

The effort to graduate that 88-year-old building from a worn-out structure into modern apartments was far from elementary.

Of Decline and Resurrection

Trenton's Mayor Cathie Smith served on the Trenton School Board during the early 1990s when local officials were wrestling with what to do with the abandoned property. In one plan, the board asked voters to approve a levy to build a new school.



The auditorium retains its original look and seats from when students still matriculated here.

“It was a very good, sturdy building, but it was no longer very conducive to a school setting,” Smith says of the building, which at the time featured dilapidated stairwells, decrepit ceiling tiles and electrical infrastructure that can euphemistically be described as needing some work.

“Most people thought that we would tear it down,” Smith says. “We didn’t want it to sit vacant and we really lobbied to have it torn down.”

School officials soon discovered that the cost to tear it down or to remodel it were about the same. A coalition of doc-

tors based in Trenton, who wanted to save the building for sentimental and preservation reasons, bought the site and redeveloped it as a retail space.

The city supported the move by allowing tax increment financing (TIF) on the property to allow for changes to the building, enabling about a dozen shops to be built, including a family restaurant located in a former economics classroom. The retail space eventually folded and the site again sat vacant.

The building remained a divisive conversation topic among community members, with one side wishing to raze it and

the other wanting to save it, Smith says. It seemed the only thing the group could agree on was their desire for it not to sit vacant because of its prime downtown location. Some, including Smith, feared the eyesore would be detrimental to the town’s image.

There was no middle position; one was either for tearing the building down or saving it, according to Trenton Community Development Director Ralph Boots, who agreed that its presence would guarantee an ongoing battle among community members.

Most in the community were elated when Hamilton Properties, based in Springfield, Mo., stepped in with an offer to restore the building. Developer Ryan Hamilton connected with Smith in 2007 and the pair then began working with the city administration to plan the development and hold hearings. Hamilton Properties’ reputation was strong, because it had recently assisted with Trenton Heights, another housing project, and had earned a positive reputation among the citizenry.

“Our company has always been intrigued with these types of buildings,” Hamilton says. “These buildings are staples of their communities. Many of these types of buildings, in their day, were the ‘talk of the town.’ Nowadays, these buildings are becoming eyesores in the com-



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A common area that still retains its old school charm (top); a mural has been painted the length of a hallway honoring local landmarks and history (above). Netta Coon (at right).

munity and the talk has shifted from positive to negative. We wanted that talk of the town to shift from, 'What are we going to do with this building?' to 'Wow look at it now!'"

Hamilton Properties owns and manages another apartment community in Trenton. "We have been involved in the town through this apartment building for 23 years," Hamilton says. "I have driven by Adams Park many times throughout the years, as it is located off of Trenton's main thruway. One day, it caught my eye and I truly noticed it for what it could become."

Hamilton says that the primary reason why Adams Park works today is because of

the people of Trenton. "We bonded with the community from the very start, and it was a mission for all of us to get this development done," Hamilton says.

"I hold [Trenton Mayer Cathie Smith] in the highest regard, as she is an incredible lady with a lot of charisma and spunk. She was the true catalyst behind it all."

Housing demand in Trenton worked in the developer's favor and Boots entered the discussions with a recently conducted housing study. "There was need," Boots says.



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Hamilton conducted a voluntary, secondary study intended to show demand for housing and Boots continued to act as liaison with the community. They solicited 155 signatures of endorsement.

"It was amazing," Boots says. "When I went to get support—city council, county commissioners, college, school district, hospital, citizens—everyone was very supportive. One thing about living in a rural community is you have to have all entities on board and have a healthy partnership."

Finding Financing

The project, which carried an estimated cost of \$6 million, sought to preserve the historic features and much of the original architecture of the school. It qualified for federal and state low-income housing and historical tax credits, with the state tax credits accounting for approximately \$1.5 million of the financing and the federal credits worth approximately \$1.2 million.

The historic tax credits are based on the qualified rehabilitation expenditures (QRE), which determine the amount of credits awarded. The tax credits awarded were what made the project financially feasible, says project attorney Richard Walters of Husch

Blackwell, based in Springfield, Mo.

The project's listing on the National Register of Historic Places also merited historic tax credits, says Elizabeth Rosin of Rosin Preservation, who helped secure the credits for the developer.

To take advantage of the tax credits, the design and features had to follow specific guidelines that ensure the historic



An interior glimpse of the renovation of Adams Park.



Adams Park offers modern-day living amenities.

nature is maintained throughout the conversion.

These historic features were presented in a second part of the application along with architectural plans and other details, Rosin says. For instance, significant portions of the auditorium were retained and restored as a community space—where Coons and others can visit and reminisce. Today's windows replicate those of the former school building, which were no longer contained in the building at the start of the project. The design of the stair enclosures was also modified to maintain the

open character of the long corridors.

As an added gesture to the community, Hamilton Properties removed the TIF on the property and put the building back on the tax roll.

One Foot In the Past

Adams Park today retains much of its original 1920s charm, but features subtle upgrades and modern amenities that don't overshadow the sense that, at one time, many young minds were molded here.


For instance, according to Principal Architect Rita Baron, the open feel of the entrance and lobby was retained to ensure the environment felt comforting.

Adams Park features 10 one-bedroom, one-bathroom apartment homes and 25 two-bedroom, one-and-a-half bathroom residences. Residents tend toward low to moderate incomes, and housing vouchers are also accepted at the community. Trenton, with a population of approximately 6,000, has a median salary per household of about \$33,300. The livestock-raising farming town's primary employers are ConAgra Grocery Foods and Modine Manufacturing.

Each Adams Park residence has its own air-conditioning unit. Laundry services are included on all three floors and a community gathering area and library creates opportunities for resident social events. The property has been modernized, is ADA-accessible and all original electrical and plumbing systems have been fully replaced. The community also boasts an Internet café, exercise room, sitting room, lounge, storage areas, auditorium and dining room.

Hamilton boasts that the project is one of few statewide that are Green Globe-certified, which is a set of principles projects must maintain for sustainability.

"It's amazing what it has turned into," Baron says. "There's nothing like old buildings; and getting to this point has been difficult. At the end, you know how hard it was, but it was worth it."

Now that's old-school living. 



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